Chapter 44

Paradigms of Public Relations in an Age of Digitalization:
Social Media Analytics in the UAE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the uses of social media in public relations (PR) departments in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It seeks to lay the basis for understanding the place of social media in the UAE and to contribute to the analysis of the issue of social change in the PR offices. The chapter assesses the state of PR in the UAE in relation to global media and highlights needs in this area for both public and private enterprises. Presenting interview data taken from a cross section of 40 organizations throughout the UAE, it addresses perceptions of benefits, challenges, public acceptance, and future strategies of social media in relation to global SM as whole. It finds that barriers to the use and acceptance of SM in PR have mostly been lifted.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, public relations have been shown to be an essential tool for business marketing. When large investments in marketing strategies have not yielded desired results in a timely fashion (Kaplan, 2012), corporations have been compelled to seek professional help (Harris, 2008) from the public relations expert. Traditionally, Public Relations intervention has taken the form of placing advertisements in newspapers (Motti, 2011). These efforts however are rapidly being replaced given the onset of Social Media Public Relations, or SMPR (Dave, 2008). Yet to date little research has been performed to date on the use of SMPR techniques in the UAE. This research critically analyzes the operations of SMPR departments in organizations in the United Arab Emirates. It adopts a multidimensional approach to offer a socio-scientific perspective on this subject matter. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were chosen in combination to produce optimal results (Meyette, 2003).

Social Media has been defined as the democratization of substance and / or content and the comprehension of the responsibility (Powell, et al., 2011) played by various people across the globe during the reading and propagation of information (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). It is identified in part with websites like Facebook, Friendster, and MySpace which permit their clients to allocate content (Kaplan, 2012), Media along with many others (Caverlee, Webb, 2008), and with websites intended for photo and video sharing, like Flickr, YouTube, and Photo bucket (Jarboe, 2009). The Social Media category also includes news collection and online reference websites (Elavsky & Elavsky, 2011), like Digg and Wikipedia, and micro-blogging sites like Twitter (Garfield, 2010).

Overall, the online experience is becoming an ever more important means through which organisations relate to their customers and clients. Today, Facebook and Twitter marketing are considered vital constituents in a contemporary Social Media marketing strategy (Gillin, 2008). Given its potential to establish and relay certain attitudes, social media also can play an important role in public relations. Various researchers like Kaplan, Andreas, Michael and Haenlein (2010) have documented the dual role of Social Media pathways arising out of its interactive model. Social media is recognized as having the potential to both grant corporations an influential business presence (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011) and to act as centres for clients to locate and interact with a corporation's services (Reisner, 2009) and products. Among its contributions to business presence is the ability of Social Media Pathways to assist corporations in creating and maintaining (Hill, 2005) a constructive social status. For example, entrepreneurs can craft and sustain their business profiles on social networking sites. Research shows that social media pathways can help a business entrepreneur to craft more cohorts (Gregory, 2004) and/or followers by leveraging its ability to collate information (Botan &Taylor, 2006) and send out updates on a regular basis (Dave, 2008). Such exposure helps to gain new customers while also avoid losing already established consumers.

To take full advantage of social media, PR must recognize and successfully incorporate the features that distinguish social media. As a means of communication, on-line interaction differs from traditional forms of exposure (Grosseck & Holotescu, 2008). In contrast to static and repetitive advertising and sound-bites, social media often entails instant and interactive correspondence (Grossman, 2009), including dialogue in place of monologue. It is comprised of a complex network of inter-related signs and symbols (Hobsbawm, 2009) with which browsers and users can instantly respond without recrimination. In such an environment, a company or organisation must respond to continual questioning (Ihator, 2001), appraisal, and/or criticism. Thus social media is distinct from traditional media in part due to the self-regulating nature (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011) in which social media often operates. Although many companies have set up websites on the internet to gain recognition in the virtual domain, many *do not realise the potential* of on-line interaction (Chafkin, 2007), and in some instances are not generating any business at all.

The making of the public relations profession in UAE has been affected tremendously by the socio-economic, educational and cultural development of the country (Ayish & Badran, 1997). Ministries and government administrations established their in-house public relations departments and sections to respond to growing demands from their various publics. But is the UAE, with its impressive PR media systems investment in place, earnestly incorporating social media?

This general question leads to several research questions addressed in this paper: Is the UAE doing enough to incorporate social media as an aspect of PR? What are the impacts of social media to the already established PR institutions in the UAE? What are the common challenges in public relations in the UAE, particularly with respect to gender?

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